

The Art of Panels

By Guy Kawasaki

Most panels have audiences of 100 to 250 people; however, approximately 20,000 people watched Churchill Club's "Startup 2006" panel (watch it at <http://snipurl.com/lasij>). You could have knocked me over with a feather when I learned of this number. More people probably watched this panel than any other panel in the world in 2006!

Online audiences of this magnitude impact every panel in several ways:

- The size of the audience at the event is not nearly as important as whether it will be recorded and publicized. With online video, there's no such thing as a small audience anymore.
- No matter how small the physical audience and obscure the event, you'd better be on your toes and give a great performance because tens of thousands of people might see it. With online video, there's no such thing as a "small slip up."
- Best case: look at both the audience and the camera. Whatever you do, don't look at only the moderator unless you want 20,000 people to only see the side of your face.

http://snipurl.com/art_panel

How to kick butt on a panel

Superficially, a panel looks easy. There are four or five other people on it—all of whom you think you're smarter than—and it only lasts 60 minutes. How hard could it be? Herein lies the problem: everyone thinks a panel is easy so they don't take it seriously. A panel is actually a better opportunity to position yourself than a keynote because you are juxtaposed to four or five people in real time—whereas keynotes are sequential. If you want to stand head and shoulders above the other panelists, here's what to do:

1. Know the subject. I hope you're getting as tired of duhisms as I am, but this needs to be said. If you're invited to a panel on wireless security, and you don't know much about the subject, then you should decline. I don't care how wonderful the opportunity seems to be. If you can help it, never provide an audience the opportunity to truly know that you're clueless.
2. Control your introduction. The first mistake that most panelists make is that they assume the moderator has an up-to-date and accurate bio. Odds are that the moderator either knows nothing about you or has done a Google™ search and printed a bio that is inaccurate. Before the panel starts, hand the moderator a three sentence description of who you are and tell her to read it verbatim.
3. Speak up. The optimal distance between your lips and the microphone is one inch. You're sitting down. You're hunched over. You're not projecting. So get close to

- the mic and speak up. Assume there's a 51-year old geezer in the back with a hearing aid like me.
4. Entertain, don't just inform. As in keynotes, your goal is to entertain, not only inform. The funnier you are, the more people will think you're smart because it takes great intelligence to be funny. I'd go so far as to pick a friendly fight with the moderator or another panelist. Let it rip. Have fun. Think of a panel as friendly, though emotional, conversation in front of 500 of your closest friends.
 5. Tell the truth, especially when the truth is obvious. If you're lucky, and there's a good moderator, that moderator will try to pin you to the wall with tough, embarrassing questions. This is a good thing because it provides an opportunity to (a) be funny and (b) show that you're a straight shooter. "The truth will get you glee." If everybody knows the truth, don't even try to fudge. It would be far better to say, "I plead the Fifth Amendment." That will get a laugh.
 6. Answer the question that's posed, but never limit yourself to the question that's posed. When asked a question, answer the question (unless you have to plead the Fifth). Answer it as fast as possible, but then feel free to take the conversation in a direction that you want. For example, let's say that the moderator asks, "Do you think cell phones will get viruses soon?" It's perfectly okay to answer, "Yes, I think this is an issue, but the real issue that faces most of us is the lack of good cell phone coverage," if that's what you really want to talk about.
 7. Be plain, simple, and short. Let's assume you are on a panel of experts. Let's further assume the moderator is an expert. The moderator asks a question. You think that you're answering her and the other panelists—all experts, so you launch into alphabet soup, acronym du jour. Big mistake. The audience is, well, the audience. Not the moderator nor the panelists. Reduce the most complex and technical issues to something plain, simple, and short, and you'll position yourself as (a) unselfish and (b) a star.
 8. Never look bored. This may be one of the hardest aspects of a panel. Let's say the other panelists launch into a long, boring, jargon-filled response. The temptation is to whip out a Blackberry® at worst or to look bored at best. Don't do it. Fake rapt interest because the moment you look bored, a photographer is going to snap a picture or the cameraman is going to put your face on the 10-foot screen. You've got it made if you can fake sincerity!
 9. Never look at the moderator. The moderator is asking the questions, but he is merely a proxy for the audience. When you answer, don't look at the moderator. Look at the audience because the audience doesn't want to see the side of your head. (FYI, a good moderator will not make eye contact with you—forcing you to look away from him and look at the audience).
 10. Never say, "I agree with (name of previous panelist)." A moderator will often ask everyone to answer the same question. If you're not the first one to answer, there's the temptation to say, "I agree with what my colleague just said..." That's a dumb response. Come up with something different, and if you're not quick enough on your feet to do this, don't go on the panel. At the very least say, "I think that question has been answered. For the audience's sake, let's move on."

<http://snipurl.com/kickbutt>

How to be a great moderator

How many times have you watched a panel and thought that it was entertaining and informative? Your answer is probably a small number. Moderating a panel is deceptively hard—harder, in fact, than keynoting because the quality of the panelists is usually beyond your control. Here's how to be a great moderator.

- Don't over-prepare the panelists. The more panelists prepare in advance, the more likely they will be boring. If you provide all the questions in advance, many panelists will prepare carefully-crafted, devoid-of-content responses—in the worst case, even tapping PR people for help. The most you should provide is the first two or three questions to make panelists feel comfortable and “prepared.”
- Do prepare yourself in advance. Moderators need to prepare more than panelists because they need to be able to stir up the pot with questions about the latest industry controversies and hot issues. It's hard to do this in real time, so prepare the questions in advance using multiple research resources. If you don't have enough industry knowledge to stir up the pot, then decline the invitation to moderate the panel.
- Never let panelists use PowerPoint®. Even if the panelists are CEOs and Nobel Prize winners, never let them give a “brief” PowerPoint presentation. If one panelist uses PowerPoint, everyone else will want to. Then the session will encounter the technical difficulty of making multiple laptops work with the projector or the challenge of integrating presentations into one. Forget it.
- Never let panelists use anything special. Suppose everyone accepts the no-PowerPoint rule, but a panelist comes up with the clever idea of showing a “brief” corporate video. Again, the answer should be, “No can do.” Frankly, if a panelist needs either a PowerPoint presentation or a video, he's probably not articulate enough to be on the panel, so get rid of him if you can.
- Make them introduce themselves in 30 seconds. Give panelists 30 seconds to introduce themselves. The moderator shouldn't read each panelist's bio because he will inevitably (a) mispronounce something (I didn't know I was Polish until I was introduced as “Guy Kowalski”); (b) get some fact wrong “Oh, you didn't graduate from Harvard Business School, you just attended a one-week executive boondoggle there;” or (c) fail to highlight some crucial part of the panelist's background.
- Break eye contact with the panelists. Look at the panel, ask a question, and then look at the audience. Do not continue eye contact with the panelists because you want them to speak directly to the audience, not to the moderator. Also, don't hesitate to tell panelists to speak louder or get closer to the microphone.
- Make everyone else look smart. The goal of the moderator is to make the panelists look smart. It is not to make himself look smart—or grab the most attention. Moderators can make panelists look smart in two ways: first, give them a few softball questions that they can knock out of the park. For example, “What do you view as the most pressing issues of the industry?” Second, extract good information out of the panelists by rephrasing, summarizing, or clarifying what

- they said. A good moderator accounts for only 10% of the speaking time of a panel—she is the “invisible hand,” not the star.
- Stand up for the audience. Making panelists look smart does not mean letting them bull shitake the audience. My theory is that the moderator is called the moderator because her role is to ensure that there is only a moderate level of bull shitake and sales pitches. A good moderator is the audience’s advocate for truth, insight, and brevity—any two will do. When a panelist makes a sales pitch or tells lies, you are morally obligated to smack him around in front of the audience.
 - Involve the audience. Moderators should allocate approximately 30% of the duration of the panel to questions from the audience. Any more, and the audience will run out of high-quality questions. Any less and the audience will feel like it did not participate. However, don’t feel obligated to accept any stupid questions from the audience any more than you accept stupid answers from the panelists. Always have a few good questions in your hip pocket just in case no one in the audience has a question. Or, even better, you could “seed” the audience in advance.
 - Seize the day. In my book, a moderator would get an A+ if he can catch a panelist “in the act.” For example, many venture capitalists cop the attitude that “We knew that the dotcom bubble would burst, so we were very careful about what we invested in.” The moderator should win a prize if he can come back with, “Then why did you invest in discountdogfood.com?” I realize this conflicts with “make everyone else look smart” but moderating is a complex activity—what can I say?

http://snipurl.com/great_moderator

Guy Kawasaki is a managing director of Garage Technology Ventures, an early-stage venture capital firm, and a columnist for Entrepreneur Magazine. Previously, he was an Apple Fellow at Apple Computer, Inc. Guy is the author of eight books including The Art of the Start, Rules for Revolutionaries, How to Drive Your Competition Crazy, Selling the Dream, and The Macintosh Way. He has a BA from Stanford University and an MBA from UCLA as well as an honorary doctorate from Babson College. To contact Guy, visit his How to Change the World blog at blog.guykawasaki.com.